DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 258 CS 209 062

AUTHOR Gerhard, Mike; Loving, Jim
TITLE Effects of Network Commentary on Viewers' Reactions to 1984 Reagan Campaign Film.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (68th, Memphis, TN, August 3-6, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; *Audience Analysis; Higher Education; *Mass Media Effects; News Reporting; *Persuasive Discourse; Politics; Propaganda; Public Opinion; *Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Audience Research; *News Commentators; Presidential Campaigns; Reagan (Ronald)

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the effects of NBC television's critical commentary on a 12-minute 1984 Reagan campaign film on audience perceptions of gratifications received from the film. It was predicted that exposure to the critical NBC commentary would result in lower evaluations of the film's helpfulness (gratifications received), and that the commentators' critical remarks would lower evaluations of President Reagan. Subjects were 226 undergraduate communications students, divided into two groups. The experimental group viewed a video tape of the Reagan campaign film and the preceding 10 minutes of commentary during which three NBC newscasters presented their opinions and interpretations of the film. The control group viewed only the video tape of the Reagan film. After viewing the video tape, subjects in both groups were asked to complete a questionnaire. The results indicated that subjects who watched the critical commentary as well as the film responded more negatively than those who saw only the film regarding the perceived helpfulness of the film in learning about Reagan's qualifications, his stand on the issues, and what he would do if elected. The experimental subjects were also less likely to see the film as helpful in providing voting guidance. A majority of subjects in both groups agreed that the film, in general, was worth watching and disagreed with the statement that such films were a waste of time and money. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED258258

Radio-Television

Journalism Division

Effects of Network Commentary on Viewers' Reactions to 1984 Reagan Campaign Film

Mike Gerhard and Jim Loving

School of Journalism

Southern Illinois University

Carbondale, IL 62901

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

To be presented to the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Memphis, August, 1985.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael E. Gerhard

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209062

On August 23, 1984, a controversial 18-minute film promoting President Reagan's re-election campaign was broadcast on NBC during the final evening of the Republican National Convention in Dallas.[1] The New York Times reported, "It coupled a recitation of the Reagan administration's record with appeals to patriotism in a presentation so skillful that some experts feel it may alter the art of political film making."

Immediately before the film's broadcast, three well-known NBC news commentators made a number of critical remarks about the film's purpose and content. Did this critical commentary influence viewers' immediate reactions to the Reagan campaign film? That was the basic research question this controlled experiment attempted to answer.

A review of the literature on political communication suggests that network commentary and analysis may influence viewers' impressions of major political phenomena. Previous studies focused on the short-term effects of media commentary and analysis on reactions to a political documentary, a presidential debate, a presidential news conference, and a presidential candidate's speech.

Robinson (1977) demonstrated that "instant analysis" tended to reduce the effectiveness of the controversial CBS documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon." The results of his controlled experiment revealed that critical analysis following the documentary tended to lower opinions about groups and individuals connected with the CBS program.

Lang and Lang (1979) concluded that media analysis and commentary may have influenced viewers' impressions of the first

1976 Ford-Carter presidential debate. Subjects who may have been exposed to post-debate media analysis were more negative toward the candidates and the debate itself than subjects who viewed only the debate.[2]

Paletz and Entman (1981) conducted a laboratory experiment to gauge the effects of CBS instant analysis following a 1974 press conference by President Nixon. The authors concluded that several minutes of media analysis following the news conference resulted in a number of negative reactions to the president. Davis, Kaid and Singleton (1977), on the other hand, demonstrated that instant analysis following a 1976 speech by presidential candidate Ronald Reagan did not affect evaluations of the speaker.[3]

Indirect evidence of the effects of media commentary and analysis can be found in the classical persuasion research literature. Hovland, Janis and Kelly (1953) and others have shown that commentary from credible sources can blunt the impact of an appeal made through the mass media.

Most of the research on the effects of media commentary and analysis has involved an examination of what happens to individual reactions as a result of media analysis after a major political appeal. Other persuasion research findings suggest, however, that media commentary before a political appeal may also affect viewers' reactions (Cialdini & Petty, 1981). The process whereby subjects are informed of an upcoming message's purpose and content has been called "forewarning." Experimental evidence indicates that forewarning typically leads to persuasion resistance.

Despite growing empirical evidence of the short-term effects of media analysis and commentary, only a handful of studies have

investigated this area of political communication effects research.

The research reported here examines the effects of network commentary and analysis in three ways believed to be unique. First, the major political appeal in this case was a nationally-broadcast partisan political campaign film --a $450,000 "documentary" designed to promote a presidential candidate. Second, the critical commentary studied here occurred before the political message, unlike instant analysis which follows an important political appeal. Third, unlike variables found in previous experimental studies on the effects of network commentary, several of the dependent variables examined here relate to media gratifications obtained.

Findings reported in the literature on media uses and gratifications suggest that individuals typically have two dominant motivations for following campaign media content: surveillance of the political environment and vote guidance (O'Keefe & Atwood, 1981). One possible result of exposure to a political message is the viewer's evaluation of how well the message satisfied surveillance, vote guidance, and other gratifications sought. McLeod and Becker (1981) have called these self-reported evaluations "gratifications received."

This study attempted to examine the effects of NBC's critical commentary on perceptions of gratifications received from the 1984 Reagan campaign film. Since previous findings indicate that network commentary produces mainly negative effects (Robinson, 1977; Lang & Lang, 1979; Paletz & Entman, 1981), we predicted that exposure to the critical NBC commentary would result in lower evaluations of the film's helpfulness (gratifications received).

In addition to self-reported gratifications received, we were interested in other immediate reactions to the film and its narrator and principal subject --President Reagan. We predicted not only that NBC's critical commentary would make viewers more critical of the film itself, but also that the commentators' critical remarks would lower evaluations of Reagan.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In October, 1984, 226 undergraduates enrolled in courses in the College of Communication and Fine Arts at Southern Illinois University were assigned randomly to two groups. Group A, the experimental group, viewed a video tape of the Reagan campaign film and the preceding 10 minutes of commentary during which three NBC newsmen presented their opinions and interpretations of the film. Group B, the control group, viewed a video tape of only the Reagan film.[4]

The critical commentary presented by Roger Mudd, Tom Brokaw and John Chancellor focused primarily on the film's purpose and content. Brokaw began with this warning about the film's persuasive intent: "It is not a documentary; it is a commercial for Ronald Reagan." He then described the film as a "sanitized view" of Reagan's presidency and then warned the experimental group that "there are some things you should know about the film before you see it, just to put it into some kind of context."

Mudd then characterized the film as a powerful piece of "political propaganda" and described the film's content. "The theme is patriotism --undisguised and unabashed," Mudd said. "You will hear the words 'strong' and 'America' and 'proud' and 'patriotic' again and again. You will see the American flag a lot."

Brokaw forewarned the experimental group about several "notable omissions" in the film. Chancellor then elaborated on some of the film's omissions in the area of foreign policy. "There is nothing about disarmament in the film. The Soviet Union isn't mentioned," Chancellor said. "Mr. Reagan is the only president since we recognized the Soviet Union in the 1930s not to have met with the Soviet leadership."

Chancellor also warned viewers that "the film does not mention the Middle East" and "the 250 U.S. marines who died in Beirut." He continued, "There is nothing about El Salvador and Nicaragua in the film...despite millions of dollars that have been spent there by this administration."

Brokaw then warned viewers in the experimental group that "there is no reference to a balanced budget" and "no substantive mention of the environment." Finally, Brokaw noted that the film "was the brainstorm of (presidential aid) Michael Deaver who worries a lot about the president's imagery."

The two groups viewed the treatments simultaneously on identical monitors in separate but identical lecture halls to ensure control over the testing environment. The rationale given was a study of opinions on the presidential campaign. Subjects were instructed not to discuss the video tape until after the session was over and conversation was kept to a minimum.

After viewing the video tape, subjects in each group were asked to complete a post-test questionnaire which included six gratifications received items. The wording of the gratifications received items was specific to the content of the 1984 Reagan

film. Subjects were asked to respond to each of these statements on a five-point "agree-disagree" scale.

The questionnaire also included the following items: two closed-ended items measuring perceptions of the film's accuracy and balance; two closed-ended items measuring perceptions of the film's overall value; one closed-ended item measuring evaluations of Reagan's performance as president; and a battery of seven-point semantic differential scales measuring perceptions of Reagan's image traits.

Data analysis revealed that the random assigment procedure made a meaningful comparison between the two groups possible. No significant differences occurred between the groups on age, gender, party affiliation and voter registration.[5]

FINDINGS

Did the critical remarks made by three NBC news commentators influence viewers' evaluations of gratifications received from the Reagan campaign film? As Table 1 illustrates, subjects who viewed the critical NBC commentary were less likely to see the film as an important learning tool.

Three items were presented in the post-test questionnaire concerning surveillance gratifications received. As Table 1 shows, on all three of the surveillance gratification items the subjects who watched the critical commentary responded more negatively than subjects who saw only the film, and significantly so. The surveillance gratification items dealt with the perceived helpfulness of the film in learning about Reagan's qualifications ($t=-2.64$, $p<.01$), his stand on the issues ($t=-2.10, p<.05$), and what Reagan would do if elected ($t=-2.23, p<.05$).

Subjects who viewed the critical NBC commentary were also significantly less likely to see the film as helpful in providing vote guidance (see Table 1). When asked to evaluate the film's helpfulness in "making up my mind how to vote in the election," the group which saw the critical network commentary scored significantly lower than the control group ($t=-2.23, p<.01$).

Subjects were also asked whether the film was helpful in becoming better acquainted with Reagan as a person. The means on this item, displayed in Table 1, show that the group which saw the commentary scored lower than the control group, but the difference between the groups was not statistically significant. On the item related to interpersonal discussion, "To give me something to talk about with others," there was also no significant difference between the treatment groups.

The findings, in general, indicate that the critical commentary presented by NBC before the Reagan campaign film lowered viewers' perceptions of the film's helpfulness in providing political surveillance and vote guidance (gratifications received).

Lang and Lang (1979) demonstrated that media analysis following the first 1976 presidential debate may have produced more negative reactions to the debate itself. So we predicted that NBC's critical commentary would result in lower evaluations of the 1984 Reagan campaign film. But the mean scores reported in Table 2 show that the pre-film NBC commentary had no significant impact on viewers' perceptions of the film's general value.

A majority of subjects in both groups agreed that "The film, in general, was worth watching," and disagreed with the statement,

"Films like these are a waste of time and money." Apparently the film had wide appeal for most subjects in this experiment. Perhaps this can be explained by such factors as the high production quality of the film, Reagan's popularity, the film's information and entertainment value, and interest in the campaign.

On the other hand, subjects who viewed the critical network commentary gave significantly lower evaluations of the film in terms of its accuracy and balance. Neither group rated the film particularly high on the accuracy items. But, as Table 2 illustrates, the group which saw the critical NBC commentary was even more negative in its perceptions of the film's accuracy ($t=-2.55, p<.01$) and balance ($t=-2.82, p<.01$). The simple explanation for this finding is that the NBC commentators had pointed out some of the film's major omissions, for example, the lack of any references to the budget deficit problem or Reagan's foreign policy failures.

Apparently this forewarning about the Reagan film's content had a significant impact on perceptions of the film's truthfulness and, indeed, may have made subjects more critical of Reagan's persuasive appeal.

Earlier findings suggest that network analysis following a political appeal tends to lower evaluations of the political speaker (Lang & Lang, 1979; Robinson, 1977; Paletz & Entman, 1981). However, the results of this experiment showed that NBC's critical commentary before the film had no significant impact on evaluations of Reagan.

As Table 2 shows, no significant differences occurred between the treatment groups on the item, "In general, I approve of

Reagan's performance as president." It may be the case that perceptions of Reagan, a popular president, were so firmly established that NBC's critical commentary was incapable of producing a change in basic orientations toward Reagan or reducing the impact of the film.

Similarly, there was no significant difference between the treatment groups on any of the semantic differential scales dealing with perceptions of Reagan's image. Subjects in both groups reported fairly high evaluations of Reagan on all of the image items in the questionnaire. This finding is consistent with Davis, Kaid and Singleton (1977) who showed that instant analysis after a 1976 campaign speech did not lower evaluations of Reagan.

The results of the present study speak to the power of the film, the popularity of Reagan, and the power of an incumbent president. As political scientist Herb Asher (1980) has noted:

> An incumbent president seeking election seems to be in a formidable position. The very fact of being President, with its extensive media coverage, bestows upon the President an aura of competence, experience, and familiarity that a challenger is hard-pressed to match.

A popular incumbent president seeking re-election possesses a tremendous advantage, including perhaps the ability to withstand criticism from network news commentators.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This controlled experiment explored the effects of critical commentary on viewers' reactions to a partisan campaign film about President Reagan originally broadcast on NBC during the August, 1984, Republican National Convention.

The results show that critical remarks made by three NBC newsmen before the film's broadcast had several negative effects on viewers' perceptions of gratifications received from the film. In short, subjects who viewed the critical commentary were less likely to see the partisan campaign film as an important learning tool.

Subjects exposed to the critical NBC commentary were also more critical of the film; they were less likely to see it as accurate and balanced. On the other hand, the results show that NBC's critical commentary had no significant impact on perceptions of the film's overall value and no effect on evaluations of Reagan.

The results reported here indicate that critical network commentary may help viewers sharpen their critical abilities when a candidate attempts to manipulate the electorate with a skillfully produced campaign film. Network efforts to forewarn viewers about the purpose and content of a campaign message appear to make viewers more suspicious of the helpfulness of a political appeal.

However, the findings reported here also suggest that critical network commentary may have less impact when directed toward a popular incumbent president. It seems unlikely that critical network commentary will produce dramatic changes in basic orientations toward a popular president such as Reagan --the winner of two landslide elections.

Although this study may contribute to the narrow body of literature on the effects of media commentary, several limitations should be noted. While we believe that the experimental approach is an important strategy for measuring the effects of media commentary, one obvious drawback is the use of college students in an artificial

environment.

There is also the problem of examining only immediate effects. It would seem that there is an opportunity present to explore the long-term, cumulative effects of critical network commentary in a real-life setting. Finally, the research reported here examines only a limited range of effects produced by critical network commentary and analysis. Future research efforts should involve the exploration of a broader range of commentary effects in a variety of contexts.

Nevertheless, the results reported here indicate that the impact of the 1984 Reagan campaign film cannot be fully assessed without considering the context provided by network commentary and analysis. Indeed, the short-term effects of any political appeal --whether a commercial, political film, speech or debate-- must be considered in the context of surrounding program content.

NOTES

1. The networks had to wrestle with the dilemma of whether to broadcast the film as news or reject it as an unpaid political commercial. NBC's two counterparts, ABC and CBS, refused to broadcast the film which was narrated by Reagan himself. The networks did not broadcast a similar film about Walter Mondale that was shown at the 1984 Democratic convention in San Francisco. Portions of the 1984 Reagan film were edited into 30 and 60 second commercials which were widely used on all three major networks during the post-convention campaign.

2. Several caveats should be noted in regard to the Lang and Lang study. First, the subjects in this quasi-experiment were not assigned randomly. Second, the two groups viewed the first 1976 presidential debate in different environments. One group watched the debate in university lecture halls while subjects in the other group viewed the debate in a variety of settings. Third, differences between the two groups might be explained by erosion over time, rather than by the influence of political communication about the debate.

3. This experiment on the effects of instant analysis used a local commentator who was not then appearing in the market area, rather than a well-known network commentator.

4. A video tape of the NBC critical commentary and the Reagan campaign film was obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives.

5. About 15 percent of the subjects reported that they had seen the Reagan film when originally broadcast on NBC. However, a comparison of those who said they had seen the film before and those who said they had not revealed no significant difference.

TABLE 1

Mean Scores of Responses to Gratifications Received Items by Treatment Group

Perceived helpfulness of the 1984 Reagan film	Commentary and Film (n=115)	Film Only (n=111)
To learn more about Reagan's qualifications	2.42	2.80**
To learn more about Reagan's stand on the issues	2.64	2.96*
To see what Reagan would do if re-elected	2.53	2.84*
To make up my mind how to vote in the election	2.52	2.85*
To become better acquainted with Reagan as a person	3.52	3.70
To give me something to talk about with others	3.30	3.16

*$p \leq .05$
**$p < .01$

Mean scores based on five-point "agree-disagree" scales. The higher the mean, the higher the level of agreement. Probabilities based on one-tailed t-tests of differences between the means.

TABLE 2

Mean Scores of Responses to Accuracy, Value and Performance Items by Treatment Group

Item	Commentary and Film (n=115)	Film Only (n=111)
The film, in general, was worth watching	3.74	3.79
Films like these are a waste of time and money	2.21	2.15
The film, in general, was accurate	2.76	3.09**
The film presented a balanced picture of Reagan's record	2.11	2.49**
In general, I approve of Reagan's performance as president	3.39	3.55

**$p < .01$

Mean scores based on five-point "agree-disagree" scales. The higher the mean, the higher the level of agreement. Probabilities based on one-tailed t-tests of differences between the means.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Asher, H.R. Presidential elections and American politics. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1980.

Cialdini, R.B. & Petty, R.E. Anticipatory opinion effects. In Petty, R.E., Ostrom. T.M. & Brock, T.C. (eds.). Cognitive response in persuasion. Hillsdale, NJ:

Davis, D.F., Kaid, L.L. & Singleton, D.L. Information effects of political commentary. Experimental study of politics, 1977, 6, 45-68.

Hass, R.G. & Grady, K. Temporal delay, type of forewarning and resistance to influence. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1975, 11, 459-469.

Hovland, C.I., Janis, I. & Kelly, H.H. Communication and persuasion. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953.

Lang, G.E. & Lang, K. Immediate and mediated responses: first debate. In Krause, S. (ed.). The great debates: Carter vs. Ford. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979.

McLeod, J.M. & Becker, L.B. The uses and gratifications approach. In Nimmo, D.D. & Sanders, K.L. (eds.). Handbook of political communication. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981.

O'Keefe, G.J. & Atwood, L.E. Communication and election campaigns. In Nimmo, D.D. & Sanders, K.L. (eds.). Handbook of political communication. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981.

Paletz, D.L. & Entman, R.M. Media Power Politics. New York: Free Press, 1981.

Papageorgis, D. Anticipation of exposure to persuasive messages and belief changes. Journal of personality and social psychology, 1967, 5, 490-496.

Robinson, M.J. The impact of "instant analysis." Journal of communication, 1977, 27, 17-23.